Absorbing the Alien

By M. E. RAVAGE

Author of "The Loyalty of the Foreign-Born," etc.

MANY years ago, when America and the ways and doings of her people were to my alien mind one interminable chain of capricious inconsequences, there was, among myriads of others, one great question that kept puzzling me profoundly. Of a Sunday afternoon, the sweat-shop being closed, after dinner had been finished and before the three-thirty lecture had begun, I used to take an odd pleasure in wandering up and down the newly planted Delancey Street park; and as I watched the big motor-cars bowling off the Manhattan terminus of the Williamburg Bridge, I would ponder curiously. What do these well-groomed Americans think of us? Not that it mattered greatly. To begin with, I held with the rest of the intelligentsia of the quarter that a thinking man has only to live in peace with his revolutionary conscience and give no heed to the world's opinion of him. Moreover, when it came to opinions, we of the fellowship entertained not a few concerning the American himself. He was a crass materialist, devoted to business and baseball, to empty show, and the vain delights of the senses. Why, therefore, should the chosen of God care about the regard of the heathen? Yet idle curiosity urged, and I continued to wonder. Curiosity? No, it was not that, or at least not that alone. It was principally a fine pride in the knowledge that, whatever this self-satisfied worshiper of Mammon thought of us, he could judge only by surface appearances, because he did not know the things that I knew. And as the cars sped by, with their raucous trumpets impatiently shrieking, and the ladies smiling and the children pointing, I would take in the scene with a sweeping glance, and say to myself with a kind of exultation: "Ah, my friends, no doubt you think that this is the Ghetto, this vast, teeming human ant-hill, with its monstrous dungeons and bediamonded fishwomen, its sordid dickerings and anemic children, its rows of push-carts and repellent merchandise, its second-hand silk hats and third-rate imitation Americanism; and if you do, you have a good right to despise us. But if you would only come out of your cushioned vehicles and let me take you about a bit and give you a glimpse of the splendid things that lie beneath this crude exterior, I promise you you would come away with a very much changed impression of us."

And even after all these years, though in the meantime I myself have become an American and have arrived at a more charitable view of my adoptive fellow-countrymen, I can hardly say that my questionings have received a complete and satisfying answer. In a sense, indeed, I am now more puzzled than ever. In my association with natives of the older stocks I am frequently made to prick up my ears by some kindly reference to my old home. The East Side, I find, is not at all looked down upon by Americans of the more-penetrating sort. They have discovered no end of things that in their generosity they can admire about us—our adaptability, our intelligence, our self-reliance, our keenness at a bargain, our readiness to make use of the libraries and opportunities of this best of all countries, our good citizenship. Sometimes, too, I hear them unaffectedly praise us in a vague sort of way for our idealism; and when, with my interest excited, I ask them for concrete illustrations, they point to our charitable institutions, our strong men in public

Generated through HathiTrust on 2025-09-26 11:19 GMT
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112001586285 / Public Domain, Google-digitized
Digitized by Google
Original from
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

office who have risen from lowly beginnings, our numerous neighborhood undertakings, established by our own enterprise. Somehow, strange as it may seem, it does not satisfy me, and I am not flattered. In my boldest moments I ask them openly:

"But what of socialism and anarchism, the genuine, vital religious idealism of the Ghetto?" Whereupon I am told, in effect:

"Bah! Sansculottism, the ravings of underbred, irreconcilable trouble-makers. Thank God, it is gone! The Ghetto has found itself."

Is it any wonder that I become more and more confirmed in my opinion that the American is congenitally incapable of understanding the alien within his gates?

Unhappily, it is only too true that it is gone, the radicalism of the East Side; but my native critic's analysis is wide of the mark. It is gone not because the Ghetto has found itself, but because the Ghetto is dead. Why do I say this? Is it because I am suffering from a depression of spirits or from a species of nostalgia? Or am I merely a victim of the familiar tendency of aging men to sigh for their vanished youth and to scent decay in the progress of a generation with which they have lost touch? I wish I could think so, but the facts will not let me. I have not lost touch with either East Side people or East Side institutions, but I am aware of a melancholy change. America, the great leveler, has had her fling with my old home, as she has done with all of us aliens; and it is the young of the Ghetto themselves who are most keenly alive to the transformation. Never is the disappearance of the old vitality and the old idealism brought home to me more poignantly than when, in my meanderings among the haunts and byways of former days, I fall in with some recent youthful immigrant from Russia.

"I am going home," he invariably tells me, and looks about him with a strange despair. "There is no haven for the spirit of man in this country of yours. We others back yonder still have our revolution to make. There is something to live and fight for in Russia. Your revolution is behind you, and in a sorry plight it has left you. Not that there is nothing more for you to do; but your fires are out. You are all old men here. You seem to feel as if your goal were attained, and you vegetate and rot, with your failing vision fixed on a noble past, which in your dotage you do not even begin to understand. In Russia, in the movements, is life and youth."

As for me, I can say frankly that it is not the movements that I regret. I am not so sure now as I once was that anarchism, even the philosophic anarchism of Spencer and Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus, would cure society of all the ills that fester in its old bones; and I have a suspicion that socialism, if it were ever to come, would bring with it worse things than those it aims to destroy. Even my theology, thanks in part to the bourgeois education imparted to me in an American college, has undergone some radical modifications, so that I shy ignobly at any classification of me as an atheist. But the movement,—in the clear, bold, inclusive singular,—with its fine enthusiasms, its deep, stirring faith, its martyrdoms and sacrifices, its tragic conflicts, yes, even its bigotry and intolerance and childish exaggerations—how can I but look back to it with a kind of filial devotion and regret? It was the one thing that relieved the drabness of existence in the Ghetto and made living there tolerable. It was the soul of the quarter, and not to belong to it was tantamount to confessing that one was spiritually dead.

That was why, at meetings, in a restaurant, in the sweat-shop, the only information that people wanted about you was just that: Were you in the movement? If so, then nothing else mattered, at least for the time being, because one knew at once all that it was essential to know about you. Later on, to be sure, it might develop that you were, say, an orthodox Marxian or a revolutionary socialist or an opportunist or any one of the half dozen or more shades of anar-

Generated through HathiTrust on 2025-09-26 11:19 GMT
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112001586285 / Public Domain, Google-digitized
Digitized by Google
Original from
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

chist, which began at the moderate end of the spectrum with communism, and finished at the invisible infra-red extreme with the propaganda of the deed. All this, however, was of but secondary importance. To be in the movement was the positive, vital thing. For it proclaimed without delay that you were a modern human being, emancipated from all the outworn creeds in religion, politics and economy. It amounted to a detailed account of just how you spent your evenings, what public places you frequented, where you bought your books, and precisely what publications you read and supported. It meant, in a word, that you were a thinking person, and in the Ghetto it was taken for granted that all thinking people were right-thinking people.

I vividly recall my own initiation into the radical movement, and it is altogether characteristic that it came simultaneously with the beginnings of my literary education. I had been in the quarter for nearly a year and in the sweat-shop for two or three months. But whether it was because of my middle-class ancestry and rearing, or my preoccupations with getting a foothold in this new country, or my determination to acquire a formal education, during all that time I had been completely unaware of the spiritual realities about me. I was rather sympathizing with myself for being an operative, and regarding my fellow-workers somewhat superiorly because they were not, as I was, taking the sojourn in the shop as a temporary imprisonment and disgrace, until—until one Friday night, when I went to the play.

For weeks the entire quarter had been placarded with announcements of a new play by one Jacob Gordin entitled "The Kreutzer Sonata," and the newspapers had been hailing it as a forthcoming event. The probabilities are that I should have avoided the Thalia theater, where the masterpiece was to make its first appearance on that night, if for no other reason than because it was expected so impatiently by the less desirable people and taken by them so seriously. Among my own conservative compatriots it was regarded as highly questionable good taste to take one's amusements seriously, and no respectable Rumanian ever patronized any other theater than the Windsor, "the home of music and fun." But it chanced that on my way home from the shop my attention was attracted by a paper-bound book on a pushcart bearing the same title as Gordin's play. I bought and read it, and found it so interesting that my curiosity got the better of me, and I thought I would go to see how such a tale would be produced on the stage. With my idea of a play derived from the *café chantant,* I could picture some very entertaining matter in a performance that contained a railroad train, a disloyal wife, a jealous husband, and a murder. It never, of course, entered my head to look a little below the title, or I should have learned in time that the novel was by one named Tolstoy, and in all likelihood had nothin time that the novel was by one named sake.

Fortunately, my literary education had not yet gone far enough to make me interested in such subtleties as the authorship of books, and the result was that I did go to the Thalia that night. When I arrived at the theater the performance seemed to have no thought of beginning. In the gallery, where the seats were not reserved, there was a scramble for places, with loud threats of battle, while the attendants did the honors at the rate of ten cents per seat in the first row and five cents apiece in the more distant rows.

Shortly after nine the wild clapping and stamping and whistling suddenly ceased, the foot-lights were flashed on, the overhead lights died softly away. In the gloom that supervened the expectant stillness was only occasionally broken by a whisper from the pit below as an attendant conducted some belated patron to his seat. When the decorative curtain had glided up and revealed, instead of performers, a stereopticon screen, with the picture of a package of Russian tea standing on its head, the thunder broke forth

Generated through HathiTrust on 2025-09-26 11:19 GMT
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112001586285 / Public Domain, Google-digitized
Digitized by Google
Original from
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

anew; and as the advertisements kept succeeding one another interminably, the violence of protest from the galleries rose to savage fury. The girl on my right murmured that it was an outrage, and the man in the seat behind agreed with her emphatically, adding with a sneer, "And this is an *advanced* playhouse!"

In the end the performance did begin, and was followed with a breathless attention that to me was a revelation, except when Mrs. Kalish, as the fascinating, unhappy *Etty Friedlander,* appeared for the first time, and was greeted with a wild ovation that lasted for several minutes, and except, also, at the end of the play, when the applause and the shouts for the author were so prolonged and insistent that the management was forced to send around the corner to Canal Street, and have Mr. Gordin snatched away from his chess and his coffee, while the throng stood on the chairs and clapped away as at an appointed task, only with a vastly greater enthusiasm.

During the entr'acts, as soon as the inevitable curtain-calls had subsided, the entire audience apparently broke out into animated discussion. Strangers accosted their neighbors, men spoke up to women they had never seen, women even addressed remarks to men they did not know. Every one was in a flutter of excitement about something, I could not quite see what. "Problem," "emancipation," "parental tyranny," "dual morality"—a whole series of unfamiliar words and phrases floated out of the din and reached my ears. I could make neither head nor tail out of it all. And why, I kept wondering, did all these debaters say nothing about the humorous character in the play, the young gentleman who had amused me much with his odd habit of falling asleep at all times and places, except, as I had overheard some one behind me remark, that "Gordin *will* have his horse-play"? And why did they laugh when there was nothing to laugh at, as when the old union man, having been admonished by the young radical to think for himself, exclaimed, "What is the use of thinking when you have a constitution?"

On the whole, then, I had not been greatly stirred by the long-awaited masterpiece. In fact, I was a little disappointed. There had been neither disloyal wife nor jealous husband, although the dramatist had made some amends for his omissions by ending his play with a double murder as against the beggarly single one in the novel. I presume that I should have come away as unregenerate as ever if the man on the seat behind me had not seen fit to enter into conversation with me as we were leaving the theater.

"Another Gordin triumph," he said enthusiastically as he fell into step with me. "It is amazing how much food for thought that man can cram into a two hours' performance. And just notice how much further than the rest of us he sees. He is not just a philosopher; he is an artist with a philosophy. I know exactly how Gordin stands on the feminist question, but his preferences and his sense of abstract justice do not prevent him from facing the obstacles to progress once he comes to deal with the realities of life.

"You will see," he went on, as I made no move to answer, "the orthodox in the movement will take exception and carp. They resent any disturbing of their cherished notions. Some of our self-styled intellectuals are as bad as the clodpates. If facts are against them, so much the worse for the facts, and they will hear nothing of them. You remember when Gordin tackled the problem of capital in 'God, Man, and Devil,' a tragedy almost as fine as 'Faust' in my estimation,—there was a bitter howl from that quarter, because the dramatist had failed to live up to their pet fancies, and had made the capitalist a human being instead of painting him as black as they like to paint him in the anarchist liturgy. And Gordin's sallies on the stupidity of the working-man, although it is as plain as the nose on your face and is the theme of all our radical lamentations, was almost regarded as treason by the factional press."

We swung into East Broadway and

Generated through HathiTrust on 2025-09-26 11:19 GMT
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112001586285 / Public Domain, Google-digitized
Digitized by Google
Original from
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

stopped in front of the "Forward" office.

"Where do you live?" he asked suddenly.

"Eleventh Street," I told him, "near Avenue A."

"A little far," he admitted, "but the night is long, and it is rather balmy." He pointed to the newly laid out Seward Park, on the opposite side of the street. "Let us sit down on a bench. If it gets too late, you can come and sleep with me. My bed is big enough, and I live with my parents, so there won't be any difficulty. What was I saying? Yes; I am looking forward to a play on religion from Gordin's hand. I understand he is planning one."

I was getting interested. At last my friend had touched on a subject that I could talk about. But he did not stay there long. He kept hopping back and forth from literature to radicalism and from Gordin to atheism. He was the most restless person I had ever come in contact with.

"I 'll tell you what we 'll do," he exclaimed in the middle of a sentence. "Let us go over to Warschauer's on Gouverneur Street. There 'll be folks there, and we 'll get the news. I am anxious to know about that *Tageblatt* purity humbug." Before I had time to make up my mind he already had me under the arm, and we were striding along across lawns and over flower-beds in the direction of the Educational Alliance.

"A fine arsenal of reaction that," he remarked lightly as we passed the structure. "If I am lucky enough to be alive when the revolution comes, I hope they 'll let me attend to it with an ax and a torch."

I could not forbear a glance at him on hearing those violent words. Revolution and sabotage, with those mild, brown eyes, that rabbinical stoop in the shoulders, and that sallow, idealistic face—what a queer medley, and what a curious version of the Messianic hope!

It was just one by the clock on the Hoe Building, which towered over the squatting tenements from Grand Street beyond, as we descended half a dozen steps and entered Warschauer's Russian tea-house. With its counter piled high with edibles, its huge nickel-plated coffee-urns, its bare marble-topped tables, it was a familiar enough sight. The pictures on the walls, however, added a strange touch, and the vivacity of the guests over their tables was altogether novel. Here was an almost life-size lithograph of Tolstoy in peasant dress following a plow. Adjacent to the framed sign announcing that the management was not responsible for hats, coats, and umbrellas, hung a somewhat smaller picture of a group, entitled "Our Dead." I glanced down at the numbered names, and for the first time heard of Marx, Engels, Lassalle, Bakounine, and a variety of others—names that were destined to mean a great deal to me in the near future. A variety of posters gave notice of the coming anniversary of the Commune, of a solemn celebration in honor of the five anarchists martyred at Chicago, the Forward ball, an address by Baboushka, and the like. Photographs of authors of all nations covered the remaining wall space.

We had hardly entered when my companion was hailed with shouts of "comrade" and a spirited waving of hands from nearly every corner of the room, and then I learned that his name was Elkin. A middle-aged woman, a girl, and a squat, red-haired young man, seated at the far end of the establishment, called to him to join them. More tea was ordered, which came in double-decker tea-pots, was poured by the waiter into glasses, and was drunk out of deep saucers. Then followed the news for which Elkin—Sasha his friends called him—had brought me here. The red-haired young man immediately launched into it.

"Have you seen the 'Tageblatt'?" he asked Elkin as soon as we had seated ourselves. "The pigs have somehow got hold of advance information about Gordin's new play, and they are out with a pasquinade in their characteristic style."

"But what is it they want?" the young woman inquired in Russian.

Generated through HathiTrust on 2025-09-26 11:20 GMT
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112001586285 / Public Domain, Google-digitized
Digitized by Google
Original from
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

At this our informant smiled.

"You innocent!" he exclaimed. "This is America. Wait awhile; you 'll learn. But the logic is this: There is some excuse for a realistic, vital literature in Russia. It is a subtle vehicle of propaganda which has been invented for the express purpose of defeating the censor. But here where the good God has blessed us with everything that reasonable people can expect we ought to be entirely satisfied with Hurwitch's operettas and the Sunday supplement. Where the world is perfect, only churls and fanatics can demand that literature should be a criticism of life. So reasons the 'Tageblatt,' and if you accept its premises, you will have to admit that it is right in attacking Gordin for undermining morals and casting reflections on the purity of the family. Moreover——"

But here the middle-aged woman interrupted him.

"Bother my head about such rubbish! What is the use of wasting your precious irony on a beaten foe? Reaction is cornered and gasping its last; so of course it is clawing the air. Leave it alone. You ought to have been with me at Moskowitz's lecture on Oscar Wilde."

"Moskowitz thinks himself a radical," interposed Elkin. "You should know better, Sonya, than to go and listen to his ravings. Why don't you read Wilde for yourself? And if you must have commentaries, investigate Shaw."

"I know both," cried Sonya. "Where is your memory? Only during last year's strike you and I went over 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' and 'Salome' and 'The Duchess of Padua,' you in English and I in Russian, and we compared the translation with the original. But Moskowitz is not a fool. I used to know him quite well on the other side. In fact, he and I were in the same load of hay crossing the frontier into Germany. Well, he is getting Americanized. I had not the slightest idea what he was going to talk about. The announced title was 'A Study in Decadence,' and I can tell you it was a thoroughly masterly exposition of bourgeois morality applied to art. It reminded me of poor Gorky's adventure in New York. You know he never quite got it through his head how the American mind coupled his domestic affairs with his literary achievements."

"I am still reading his last volume—I mean 'Mother'," said the young woman. "Have you read it, Sonya? I wonder whether it was Baboushka who furnished him the inspiration? Have *you* read it, Herman?"

The squat young man with the red hair nodded affirmatively.

"But I don't know anything about Baboushka's early history. *Did* she come from the peasantry? Anyhow, if you want to see the difference between factual journalism and genius, compare Stepniak's 'Career of a Nihilist' with 'Mother.'

I was making a mental note of all these authors and titles when Sasha Elkin changed the subject.

"I understand," he said, "that the 'Freie Arbeiter Stimme' is preparing for a daily edition, and Yanoffsky has refused a raise in his salary. That 's devotion gone to seed. The fellow is everlastingly hard up. What is more, he has donated a week of his wages toward the new fund. I wish it were not slack at caps, so I could make a decent contribution. Fanny," he said, turning to the young woman, "I know you don't read Yiddish, but you have brought some money with you from home. You ought to do your share. It is the best paper in the movement, I don't care what your politics are."

"I am *going* to read Yiddish," said Fanny. "I am ashamed of myself to have to learn about my own literature in translation. I wonder whether you know here how our men are taking hold. When I stopped in Vienna 'Ost und West' was bringing out Gordin's 'Das Geld.' What is the original title?"

" 'God, Man, and Devil,' " volunteered Sonya.

"That is it. And in Berlin I went to the Hoftheater and saw Sholom Asch's 'God of Revenge.' "

Generated through HathiTrust on 2025-09-26 11:20 GMT
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112001586285 / Public Domain, Google-digitized
Digitized by Google
Original from UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

"I know, I know," interrupted Herman, with enthusiasm. "Our Maamè Loshen [mother tongue] will soon take rank among the world's literary languages. Of course we have not any Ibsens or Chekhovs or Hauptmanns, but it would not surprise me in the least if the Reclam publishers would in the near future bring out Peretz and Frug and Hirschbein, to say nothing of the older fellows. It is too bad that Abramovitch and Sholem Aleichem are so—what shall I call it?—local in their background, or we should long ago have been heard from."

Sonya burst out laughing at this.

"Oh, you incorrigible nationalists! Working for the social revolution with your right hand and plotting against it with your left. Herman, you poor hankering, dreamerish soul, will you tell me what good your dotard Abramovitch is going to do the cause of exploited labor?"

"Sonya, you make me tired with your notions. Honestly, you are as narrow as a Dukhobor. Yes, I will tell you what good Abramovitch can do, not to 'exploited labor,' but to the greater cause of world emancipation. It will do just what the rest of the literary masterpieces in the Reclam series will do. It will contribute to the mutual understanding of races. If there is any people that needs to be understood and that is suffering from prejudice it is our own poor race. You have eyes for the sorrows of the Chinese coolie, but you can't see what is in front of your own nose."

"Oh, that is it," retorted Sonya. "My dear boy, you don't belong in the movement at all. You are a full-fledged Zionist. Why don't you look into the platform of the territorialists?"

"Be still, both of you!" said Elkin, putting his hand on Sonya's mouth. "If you fellows are going to get into a personal quarrel, I'll clear out and go to bed. Good heavens! Look at the time! Why, we are left all alone. Let us be off. Comrade,"—this to me,—"you stay with me to-night."

And so I found myself in the movement. Within the ensuing week I revisited Warschauer's several times, and it was seldom I did not run into Sasha. For the most part, he and I wandered about together. I used to ask myself frequently what he found in me to interest him, but months later, at a little party in Sonya's flat on Henry Street, where the program began with chopped herring and boiled potatoes with sour cream and ended with "the Marseillaise," he enlightened me. He had at once realized, he said, what were my antecedents and my associations, largely from the way I behaved at the play; but he had made up his mind that my visit to the Thalia was a good omen and should not go to waste. So he had tackled me on all sorts of subjects, and had found me wanting until he touched on religion and discovered that I was promising material. "One good convert in these times of preparation," he concluded, "is worth a whole army after the revolution arrives. Go and do likewise, old fellow. There is lots of opportunity among your countrymen."

Sasha and his relations to his parents were to me a source of never-failing wonder. Right on the morning after my night in his house I observed that his was not the kind of family I had been used to seeing on the East Side. His father, for instance, though he retained his orthodox beard, sat down to breakfast without going through the ceremonial ablutions and without putting on his skull-cap. It was Saturday, but I noticed that old Mrs. Elkin lighted the gas herself, and made no pretense of keeping the Sabbath. After the meal both father and son smoked cigarettes, Russian things, with long, stiff-paper mouthpieces, and the older man asked the younger to tell him what the play had been about. Even his short-skirted little sister listened attentively, and made numerous comments of a kind that would have been considered highly shocking in my family. The Elkin clan were all in the movement.

One of the things that puzzled me about Sasha was that although he read English

Generated through HathiTrust on 2025-09-26 11:20 GMT
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112001586285 / Public Domain, Google-digitized
Digitized by Google
Original from
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

fluently and professed admiration for a great number of English and even American authors,—Shakspere, Shelley, Huxley, Whitman, Shaw, Ruskin,—he seldom looked at English newspapers and never went to the English theater. Once he and I spent an entire afternoon standing in line in front of the Metropolitan Opera House in an effort to obtain tickets to a performance of "Aïda," and another time (and that in the midst of a prolonged slack season) we paid an extortionate price for seats at the New Theater, where we listened to something or other by Pinero. But these occurrences were the exception rather than the rule.

"Let us go and see the new play at the Republic," I said to him on one occasion. To which he answered:

"Oh, rubbish! Did you ever see an American play?" I had not. "There is no such thing as a theater in this country," he added, "not in the sense that we have a theater, or that Germany and Russia have it. I used to go to them, and I still look through the reviews in the papers now and then. It is water. It will kill a man's soul. It is just an expensive Atlantic Garden."

"But we went to the opera and to the New Theater?"

"Oh, yes; but the opera is not American, and Pinero is a dilution of Ibsen. I tell you there is no thought life in America. What do you think of an institution that has a panicky dread of tragedy, finds Ibsen immoral, and plays Shakspere for the sole benefit of its children, as if 'Hamlet' and 'Othello' were text-books in grammar? And the press. Outside of the what-do-you-call-it, which has brains, but no soul, there is not a newspaper in New York an intelligent man can read. You know the 'Tageblatt.' How would you like twenty-four pages of that for one cent? My God! I am not an orthodox Marxian, you know. I can see the point of view of the devil when he has a point of view. But the American is a clodpate who thinks he is a philosopher."

I thought Sasha was exaggerating. At the book-shop in the basement of the Manhattan School on East Broadway I frequently saw men and women who were unmistakably Americans and who were very far removed from the category of the clodpate. Some of them, I had learned, were editors, others were lecturers, artists, lawyers. They appeared to be in the movement. They knew the things of the Ghetto and unaffectedly admired them. They talked seriously of books and modern social problems. Some even went to our theaters, where, with the help of a little German they had learned in college, they managed to follow the thread of the play. I knew of one who had laboriously acquired enough Yiddish to read some of our books. How did all this tally with Sasha's ungenerous criticism? I kept wondering until one day I heard one of these strangers within our gates say something that gave me a clue.

"What are you doing down here?" the bookseller's wife asked him.

"The usual thing, Mrs. Rabinow. I got lonesome for a bit of good talk, and I needed some books." And then, with a jovial twinkle in his eye, he added: "I reside in Prussia. This is my monthly excursion to Weimar."

We got more flattery, I am afraid, than was good for our heads. These exceptional, intellectual Americans were not the only ones who fled to the East Side as to a Mecca of their souls. Hardly a European of note ever came to America but he devoted the better part of his visit and his energies to the quarter, and shared his ideas with us, and told us what fine fellows we were. This was true not only of Gorky, who in a way was dependent on us, because he could speak only in Russian, but also of Kropotkin and of scores of others who were lionized by Fifth Avenue. They seemed to feel spiritually at home with us. Orlieneff took up his headquarters in the Ghetto, and let the rest of America come to Grand Street if they wished to see his Russian actors. And Sonnenthal not only covered the East Side with his posters in Yiddish, but gave several performances in our own theaters.

Not all of us were as fortunate as

Generated through HathiTrust on 2025-09-26 11:20 GMT
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112001586285 / Public Domain, Google-digitized
Digitized by Google
Original from UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Sasha Elkin. What most of our admiring friends from without the Pale failed altogether to see is the price that the rank and file of the East Side youth must pay for their ideals. Between the Sashas whose families were heart and soul with them in their strivings and aspirations and the unattached, unshackled converts who, like myself, had been fortunate enough to have come to America without their elders, there lay the great majority of the new generation who were in constant tragic conflict with the traditions and the sensibilities of their unhappy, outraged fathers and mothers. I don't know what Louis Gurevitch was thinking about, but surely his missionary zeal was running away with him when he imagined that he could convince his poor old parents of the futility of their faith by smoking cigarettes at their table on Saturdays and challenging their god to strike him dead on the spot. It only resulted in his father's driving him out of the house despite the fact that he was the family's chief support. The foolish chap repented of his nonsense soon enough, and kept coming to his mother and offering her his wages; but she would have none of his help.

"Apostate," she would cry bitterly, "why did you not die in my womb? You have broken my heart. Lord of the world, how have I sinned that you have given me such a *kaddish?*"

And there was Sam Menkin, who got himself arrested in the course of one of those never-ending cloak strikes. When his aged father and mother got wind of the affair they came rushing to the magistrate's court, Mr. Menkin, a former rabbi and still a pillar of the synagogue, with his patriarchal white beard, and his wrinkled wife with her peruque and long earrings, the day being a Saturday. Sam saw an opportunity in his discomfiture, and proceeded to address the court on the hypocrisy of the law and the essential un-Christian spirit of all government, and the court rewarded him with a sentence to the workhouse. Whereupon Mrs. Menkin flung herself at the feet of the magistrate, and in a medley of sobs and broken English implored that her boy be given a "show," because he was a good boy, only a little weak-minded, and that he had never been a criminal before, and would never offend again. Sam, however, seemed to resent his mother's defense of him, and was about to arise for another lecture, when his mother turned upon him with a storm of Yiddish invective, and threatened to denounce him as an old hand at the game and as the author of all her woes, because, if he had behaved himself, she could have remained in Russia all her life.

The Menkins' predicament was only a sample of the state of affairs throughout the Ghetto. The quarter was one huge battle-field, where the ancient war between the old conservative generation and the radical youth was continually being fought out. A chasm of misunderstanding yawned between fathers and children. Nearly every home had its little soul tragedy, and the grief of the elders was heightened by its undercurrent of disappointment. They had hoped that in America their faith would see an intense revival at the hands of their offspring. Freed from the hampering interference of a hostile world, Judaism would once again come into its ancient glory. That was why they had often referred to the United States as the new Jerusalem. Moreover, they had prepared to make sacrifices, so that the opportunities which had been denied to themselves in the old countries might come to their children. Here where education was free their sons would become doctors, teachers, and engineers, and be the pride and the joy of their families and the leaders of their communities. And instead of all this they found themselves helpless and ridiculous in a strange world, their young men and women drifting away from them in a manner which was far worse than apostasy to the dreaded creed of the Gentile.

If we were not all as fortunate as the Elkins, neither were we all as sincere. The worm at the core of East Side radicalism and intellectualism was its fatal attraction for the weak, the light-headed,

Generated through HathiTrust on 2025-09-26 11:20 GMT
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112001586285 / Public Domain, Google-digitized
Digitized by Google
Original from
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

the neurotic, and the immoral. Every true and genuine faith will have its destructive side. In an old civilization like ours, littered with the wrecks of established creeds, there must be tearing down before there can be any building up; only too many of our comrades seemed to be unaware that revolution is preëminently a positive, constructive philosophy. Sometimes it was selfishness and more frequently it was obtuseness that kept them from seeing that the ethical obligations demanded by the new faith were more exacting than those of the old. It was not the idealism and the aspiration of the thing that had converted them, but the liberation it afforded them from the irksome practices and restraints of the synagogue. There was my fellow-countryman Marcus Hersch, who religiously attended all the radical entertainments and excursions and called himself a Nietzschean because he believed in free love, and prided himself on his free-thinking because he did not fast on the Day of Atonement. And there, to illustrate the opposite tendency, was the neurasthenic Joe Siegel, with his melancholy eyes and hanging head, who went about moping over the sordidness of this capitalistic world, the stupidity of the mass of mankind, and the remoteness of the social revolution as if they were personal sorrows. To see these two, and the scores of others like them, often made me wish that they could be persuaded back into the ancient fold. If they could only return to the solid ground of the old despotic religion and the preoccupations of some exacting business of the kind they had been brought up in, I thought, they would become sane people again.

These, however, are only the dark poles of a world that was otherwise full of light and hope and courage. The majority of us took life bravely as we found it, and, moved by a divine discontent, strove untiringly to make it better and to improve ourselves by way of preparation for it. All our lives long we had dreamed of emancipation and democracy and a nobler personal life, and here under the freedom of American skies we eagerly set about to put our ideals into practice. It was essentially an Old-World dream which had not yet been dispelled by the rude realities of the New World. East Side radicalism was only the flowering of a deep-seated racial culture which had not yet been wrecked by collision with the sober practicalism of America. The disintegration of this culture and this idealism was to follow only later, when the Ghetto entered upon the process of welding itself to the broader life of the country in which it was flourishing, when the Old World and the New World began to react upon each other and to remold each other.

This, if I view the complexion of things in my old beloved society aright is the stage through which the Ghetto, and in a minor degree the lesser foreign colonies, is passing. It is the period of transition and denationalization, when the alien has ceased to be his ancient self and has not yet become his new self. It is a period of chaos, of the decay of ideals and racial temper, when a man's whole spiritual constitution breaks up into its separate atoms, to be regrouped and rebuilt toward a new life. It is "Americanization," the liquid state in which the immigrant is no longer a foreigner and not yet an American.

To me, who have lived the life of the Ghetto in its sturdiest days, this degeneration comes with the poignancy of tragic death. As I wander through its streets and mingle with its people I feel like a lone survivor in some devastated world. A new generation unknown to me is in possession. The revolutionary socialist has shrunk into the politician, and clamors for votes from the tail-end of a motor-car as he once angled for souls from the top of a soap-box. The fine, idealistic youth has awakened to the realization that idealism in a competitive world brings nothing but starvation, and with characteristic energy has flung himself into the money scramble, determined to convince his neighbor the clodpate that when it comes to a game of grab and grow great, he can beat him at his own tricks. He has never lacked the supposedly rare talents for this sort of thing. The difficulty was to per-

Generated through HathiTrust on 2025-09-26 11:20 GMT
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112001586285 / Public Domain, Google-digitized
Digitized by Google
Original from
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

suade him that it was worth losing his immortal soul for. Now that life has somehow brought him around to it, watch him, I pray you, making headway in the race for success. He is rapidly transforming the firm names on the avenue, and taking his seat on boards of education and mayor's committees and in the Houses of Congress, and thinking every now and then, when business is not pressing, of his fiery youth, which is cinders and dust.

The institutions have gone with their makers. That excellent socialist newspaper, which we used to maintain by our savings and our enthusiasm, and which in the old days ran a quotation from Marx for its motto, the burden of which was, "Workers of all lands, unite!" now announces in red ink that it has the largest foreign-language circulation in America and that its books are open for inspection. While another member of the old radical press invites its readers (in ink of identical shade) to contemplate the soul-stirring fact that it carries more high-class advertising than any other newspaper in the quarter, and that it addresses itself to a public of intelligence and high-purchasing power. As for the "Zukunft," I have not the heart to investigate its present condition. If it is still on the news-stands, it certainly does not dominate them as it once did. It appears to be completely overshadowed by a veritable bumper crop of "comic" weeklies and ten-cent monthlies, with pretty-girl covers. The evening school where I acquired the rudiments of a cultural education is now plastered up with monster signs which inform me that the institution guaranties to turn out a successful bookkeeper in one month and a first-class stenographer in three. Ibsen and Gordin and the Russian dramatists have virtually relinquished the stage to the "adapted revue" and Mr. Chaplin, and the tired business man shrieks with delight where the sweat-shop intelligentsia of a decade ago would have hooted with indignation. The poets are still there, stationed at police headquarters to spread the under-world scandal to a decadent public. And the lecture platform creaks to the tread of the perfunctory hireling who spouts of efficiency and advertising methods at ten dollars an evening.

There, as my prejudiced eyes see it, is your profoundest tragedy of America—this inevitable annihilation of imported civilizations. It is a tragedy, however, lightened by a vast, rollicking farce and a broad beam of hope. For into the melting-pot leaps not only the alien immigrant, but also his neighbor, the first citizen; and when the ingredients have interacted and blended, there is, I like to believe, only a temporary loss and an ultimate great gain. The East Side has been inoculated with "Americanism," and is dying of the effect. But its splendid vitality, its youthful enthusiasm, its fine aspiration toward genuine democracy, are things that cannot die. They are only spreading abroad and passing into other hands. The insurgent from Russia and Poland and Lithuania has raced to America to deliver his message of trust and hope for a better world, and now he is fainting from exhaustion. But America has laid hold of his message. I look about me in this great country, and everywhere I am struck with a fresh note of faith and idealism. The old complacency, the old conservatism, the old pig-headedness, is visibly giving way to a broader, keener outlook upon life. I see a determined groping toward a new, meaningful literature, a significant, self-conscious sincerity, a militant democracy, a revaluation of accepted values. I observe that intelligent Americans are no longer disposed to speak flippantly of spiritual things, that college men are no longer eager to break strikes, that thoughtful men and women of the more fortunate classes regard themselves no longer as a superior race of beings, but as the sharers of common burdens and responsibilities with the rest of mankind, that earnest American statesmen are coming to look upon the solution of social problems as the primary business of government. No, the spirit of the old Ghetto is emphatically not dead. It has contributed to the revitalization of America.

Generated through HathiTrust on 2025-09-26 11:20 GMT
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112001586285 / Public Domain, Google-digitized
Digitized by Google
Original from
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN